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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric textbooks continue to proliferate while writing teachers continue to grow more skeptical of their usefulness. The key question educators need to answer is whether all available composition textbooks are ineffective in the sense of being based on false notions about the composing process, or whether they are "intrinsically" ineffective. Some instructors argue for the latter case, but inexperienced writers do need certain kinds of information during their apprenticeship: for example, on the abstract principle of coherence. Such information in the context of writing instruction is most meaningful when it engagingly illuminates strategies, ways of experimenting and trying something out to see whether it works. Good writing in terms of textbooks must mean writing that is colorful, fresh, and enthusiastic without ever compromising instructional accuracy and thoroughness. Reaching students in an area such as rhetoric demands that textbook authors instruct with examples that students can immediately acknowledge. In terms of teaching about structure, textbooks also need to realize that self-directed writers do not begin with a question of what mode to write in, but of how best to say what it is they have to say. It is, however, worthwhile to teach students something about discourse theory, but only as a theory. Textbooks that can demonstrate to students that personal processes of composition can be just as provocative as the discourse modes will very likely increase the rate at which students acquire the ability to perform as genuine working writers. (HTH)

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# RECONSIDERING THE USEFULNESS OF RHETORIC TEXTBOOKS IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION COURSES

## I

Rhetoric textbooks continue to proliferate while teachers of writing continue to grow more and more skeptical of their usefulness. What is the cause of this contradiction?

One cause is certainly administrative. Many writing programs harbor the notion that a common textbook can serve as a cohesive force among its teachers: beginning teachers will use the book to structure their course; experienced teachers will use the book to remind them of the program's basic format (lest they venture too far afield). Moreover, as Ruth Mitchell, in her review of John John Ruszkiewicz's WELL-BOUND WORDS: A RHETORIC [CCC 34 (May 1983), 236-37] explains, "Textbooks are assigned . . . as a ritualistic gesture -- you're in a class and there must be a book for it." Why, we wonder, should such an attitude prevail? There are possibly two reasons:

1) A textbook is often regarded as an ultimate authority --superceding even the authority of the teacher. It is The Book that is somehow privy to the last word on any writing concern (a blatant contradiction to any organic, process-oriented pedagogy. Follow me, The Book demands, and ye shall be as writers.

2) Freshman composition is still looked upon as a service course: a basic preparation for the <u>real</u> work of a college: to

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teach X. Writing is a skill to be attained through a clearly defined period of training. Doesn't it logically follow that a textbook designed to articulate and standardize this skill be adopted? I agree with Professor Mitchell that such rationalizing does not justify textbook adoption.

Such notions, then, have resulted in textbooks that take a dynamic process--a complex and often mystifying interaction of cognition, visual perception, and language-manipulation--and freeze-dry it into instructional units (while ironically continuing to refer to the composing process as dynamic thinking).

In his English in America (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), Richard Ohmann examines fourteen composition textbooks and notes that, despite their claims to the contrary, they "are about tidying up and transcribing thought, not thinking" (p. 136); then goes on to ask:

> "Can a student ever do a piece of `decent writing' . . . by segmenting the process consciously into word choice, sentence analysis, etc., or by running through rhetorical contingencies as a computer scans items in its memory at each step? . . . This is what their [the textbook authors] schemes imply." (p.137)

The key question we need to answer is this: are all available composition textbooks ineffective (in the sense of being based on false notions about the composing process), or are composition textbooks intrinsically ineffective?

Mike Rose, for one, insists upon the latter: Composition texts, he states, "are, by nature, static and insular approaches

to a dynamic and highly context-oriented process, and thus are doomed to the realm of the Moderately Useful." [CCC 32 (Feb 1981),65] But in defending his argument, he merely points out wrongheaded notions of the textbook authors: e.g., rigid rules about topic-selection, outlining, revising, etc.; the value accorded distinct discourse categories (even though the authors admit that they overlap). He does not explain why a composition text by its very nature would be unable to capture the dynamics of the writing process--except to say that freshman composition should be taught "through a program that acknowledges both the complexity of the composing process and the dilemma of the student as a stranger in a strange land of academic discourse and academic audiences" (72-3) This program would be best informed by what Professor Rose calls "texts-for-teachers"--condensations of "our best research on the composing process and its individual variations . . . [of] information on academic writing situations and audience demands. And . . . a variety of curricula to bring this all to life." (p.73) My point is simply that such a program could effectively incorporate a <u>student</u> textbook embodying these ideals; if texts-for-teachers could capture the dynamics of an activity, why couldn't texts-for-students?

Ruth Mitchell, in her above-noted review, goes a step further by insisting that textbooks simply do not belong in a writing course. True, textbooks are repositories of information; but, she argues, "there is no `information' to be transmitted in the writing course. Writing instruction is better assimilated to a performance model. . . . Assigning sections to be read in a text-

book not only wastes time but also confuses the student, because he looks for information to be memorized when there isn't any." (p.237)

I respectfully disagree with Prof. Mitchell. Inexperienced writers are in need of certain kinds of information during their apprenticeship. "Am I getting my ideas across clearly enough to my intended readers?" can be answered by way of a competent discussion, based on the genuine experiences of working writers, of clarity and coherence, and the nature of the effort typically required to produce the required result. To illustrate, let us first examine a commonplace explanation of coherence:

> Coherence is connection and consistency. A coherent paragraph is one in which all the sentences are related logically and grammatically to make a whole that allows the reader to follow the writer's train of thought step by step. A paragraph may be unified (all the sentences related to one topic) and complete (developed enough to cover the topic), but it will still fail as a paragraph if it lacks coherence.
>
> [this is followed by an example of an incoherent paragraph, with analysis of why it is incoherent; and its coherent counterpart with an analysis of why it is coherent]
>
> --from the 2nd Edition of a handbook published in 1984.

I hasten to emphasize that this explanation of coherence is satisfactory in that it does not distort the abstranct principle ofcoherence. The point I wish to make, however, is

that students need to be drawn more engagingly into the experience of dealing with coherence. The above passage, accurate thought it is, nonetheless borders on the abrupt, the perfunctory and formalistic; it distances student writers from experience. What we need is a presentation of the concept that can involve, not detach.

In the following passage, the author aims not only to inform but to develop an experiential awareness of coherence:

> Coherence Through Unity
>
> One way to create a coherent paragraph is to make sure your paragraph is unified; a paragraph is unified if it develops only one idea. In your rough draft, paragraphs may contain irrelevant sentences or words or phrases not clearly related to the central idea. Your central idea itself may not be clear, so that the whole paragraph seems like a loose collection of ideas not clearly related to each other. Revise such paragraphs by removing unrelated ideas and clarifying the main point.
>
> In the following paragraph by a professional writer, we inserted an extra sentence that breaks the unity.
>
> [model paragraph, followed by analysis]
>
> Question for Coherence
>
> You could say that each paragraph is the answer to a question. When you brainstorm anything . . . you must ask yourself, "What am I trying to say?" Obviously, the clearer the question is to you, he clearer you can make it for the reader.

[rougn draft of a one-paragraph compositon in which the student writes about her high school teacher; directions: "Read the paragraph to see if you can understand why each sentence is in the paragraph: how does each one contribute to the overall development of the paragraph?]

--from the 2nd Edition of a rhetoric textbook published in 1984.

Here the student is made to feel involved in the very process of making a text coherent. Notice the mentioning of "rough draft," of reinforcing the notion that repeated questioning re. one's authorial intentions is integral tc the composing process, and is not just limited to "pre-writing."

"Information," then, in the context of writing instruction, is most meaningful when it engagingly illuminates strategies, ways of groping in the dark and trying something out to see if it works or not. One need not address each student's particular rhetorical situation for such information to be meaningful; like chess enthusiasts playing out the published games of the grandmasters on their own boards, students of composition are informed, little by little, of the very large number of rhetorical options at their disposal. This is not unlike the acquisition of "performance memory" that dancers like to speak of--maneuvers that the body learns independently of the mind. Mark Twain's manner of learning every bend and sandbar up and down the Mississippi River is another example. Writing is so much a matter of feeling one's way around in the dark at first. A good

textbook can serve as a constant companion--not as a seeing-eye dog (for the student writer is not blind), but as an ever-present parent helping her child to walk upright for the first time.

Information of this performative variety is what students cannot get enough of. No matter how much we encourage them to experiment with their own organizational style, their own voice, their own sentence and paragraph structuring, they must have touchstones, models, springboards--call them what you will--which provide them with some assurrance that they are not embarrassingly wide of the mark. This is, of course, classical imitatio--but with one important difference: we moderns have discovered that form does not precede content; that it is the rhetorical exigency, individually ascertained, which sets up the problem of methodology; that one does not approach a given exigency armed with a pre-determined methodology. Hence, the most one can get out of studying models is an understanding of how suitable the methodology is to the exigency; that this insight into the relationship between exigency and methodology can be useful in one's own writing. In short, the model is to be regarded as an analogue, not as a mold.

Some teachers, however, feel that models should come directly from the teacher--or from the students' own writing--rather than from a textbook. Of course, a dittoed handout is just as much a "text" as any book, but the assumption is that the models would be more relevant, more specifically related to the group of students at hand. Moreover, student essays as models are still models, shaped by exigencies as separate from the

matter at hand as any essay published in an anthology.

I would argue that both resources need to be utilized. No textbook should ever be relied on exclusively for material; that can lead quickly to tunnel vision. But exclusive reliance on non-textbook sources, in addition to putting a serious strain on teacher's time as well as departmental supply budgets, denies students the opportunity to appreciate and learn from a writing authority; and I use this word in the sense of authorial expert; of author as enlightened writer and teacher of writing. Students instinctively feel this way about a textbook--which is why a poorly written book on the subject of writing well is so hard to tolerate.

But where are the uniformly well-written textbooks that can illuminate the writing experience the way it should be illuminated? that can engage the student's interest by speaking directly to the student through those formidably slick pages--not as a disembodied voice-of-authority, but as a sympathetic fellow-writer? You might have to spend considerable time rummaging through your piles of publishers' complimentary copies to locate a possible candidate--but they do exist, and I'd like to take a few moments to point out their specific virtues, and why they can make a textbook a truly functional pedagogical instrument.

II

David Pichaske once noted, in "Freshman Composition: What Is What Is This Shit?" [COLLEGE ENGLISH 38 (Oct. 1976), 117-24] that "people who can't write cannot be made to teach writing" (p.124). It seems to me that composition textbooks have been cavalcades of

bad writing, but even worse have woefully misrepresented the composing process (as Ruth Mitchell and Mike Rose and others have made clear)--because they either lack the experience of being a writer or they buckle under the ironclad writing-as-a-product paradigm, ignoring the contradictory evidence of their own composing experiences to such an extent that they warp their potentially competent writing style into a caricature of itself.

Good writing, then, in terms of textbooks, must mean writing that is colorful, fresh, and enthusiastic without ever compromising instructional accuracy and thoroughness. The vast majority of rhetoric/handbook authors lose sight of the fact that one can be precise and engaging at the same time, and so deliberately assume a cut-and-dried tone that is not unlike that of a military boot-camp regulations manual. Here is an example.

> Use enough specific and accurate evidence to support your argument.
>
> Truth and accuracy depend on an adequate number of examples. Statistics and samplings of opinions, polls, and other kinds of data should not only be sufficiently extensive but also fairly and representatively chosen. Sometimes it is not enough that data should be picked at random. A public opinion poll taken from only one social, educational, or occupational group, for example, would probably be misleading.
>
> [from the 6th edition of a handbook published in 1982]

There is no caring writer staring over the student's shoulder here. Nor could any beginning writer reading this bit of

"advice" ever hope to get a sense of what it is really like when writers struggle to argue a point as rationally and as convincingly as the data can possibly allow--certainly one of the most intellectually exciting experiences that writing can provide. The author of the above passage has chosen to extract the emotional involvement inevitably behind the task.

Now read the following:

> To develop, or flesh out, that main idea [in your topic sentence] you supply facts, examples, and illustrations--in short, concrete details--that pertain to your topic sentence. You say that riding motorcycles is dangerous; then you show how you know this to be true. Cite statistics, if you have them, to prove how many cyclists are maimed and killed each year, but never forget that specific examples can be far more convincing than impersonal numbers. Mention the broken noses, the split lips, the fractured femurs, the spurting arteries, the dislocated elbows, the splintered teeth, the crushed pelvises; and your readers may well be convinced of the risk.
>
> [from the 2nd edition of a rhetoric/handbook, published in 1984]

For one thing, the author of this passage practices what she preaches by providing a compelling example to support her assertion that examples are important. But there's more to the passage than that. This author is speaking directly to the student, virtually with her hands clasping the reader's shoulders, looking straight into his eyes. Here truly is textual authority

that transcends the glossy page to become a caring voice in the student's ear. It's the kind of voice that would make a student want to pick up a pen and start writing.

Here is another example of textbook writing that can dazzle reluctant writers, perhaps even negate the writing-as-drudgery attitude that afflicts even the brightest of our students. With a rare combination of wisdom, wit and candor, this author easily reaches the back-of-the-class student with the I-defy-you-to-teach-me-to-write-attitude.

> Well, it's about time to write an essay, don't you think? Are you ready? No? About 90 percent of the time, neither am I. In spite of my having probably written a great deal more than you--hundreds of essays since I was a freshman in college--and in spite of the helpful hints I've stumbled upon, read about, developed, practiced, and tried to pass on to you thus farm when I sit down, alone with an idea and a blank piece of paper, I'm nervous. I feel called upon to write something wonderful but fear that I'll produce instead something embarrassingly silly, trivial, or simply dull. As long as I can manage to put off writing, I'm safe. . . . What to do?
>
> Just start. That's my only remedy. You have, of course, already started by generating a thesis and thinking about where you're going to go with it. Write the thesis down again and take a deep breath--and write another sentence. Keep going. The beauty of putting <u>anything</u> down on paper is that you give yourself <u>something</u> to work

with. The mind works by association, so give it something to associate with. The mind also works by trial and error, and error literally means "wandering." So go ahead, and wander freely, making connections right and left without worrying about being wrong.

--from a short handbook published in 1981.

As I've been implying, good writing and accurate writing are intertwined; and to segregate them for too long is to risk associating good writing with sophistry, with "mere" rhetoric, and accurate writing with telegraphic and bloodness robot-talk.

Reaching students in an area such as rhetoric demands that textbook authors, like the teachers whose classroom presence they should serve to enhance, instruct with examples that the students can immediately acknowledge. "Immediately" is the important point here: we train, we educate, we raise standards of perception in the long run; but in the short run we need to jostle, startle and delight. Follow the advice you yourself give, textbook authors, in assessing your target audience's likes and dislikes, and let this awareness inform the examples and the asides. Embrace your audience's emotionally rooted interests and obsessions: living in close quarters with students of widely (sometimes wildly) divergent backgrounds and temperaments; adjusting to life away from home; dealing with the disruption of cherished beliefs; enduring the roller-coaster ride of romantic involvement while at the same time trying to keep free of distractions. Embrace these interests and quote Plato and

Schopenhauer if need be; but don't sacrifice one center of concern for another.

A final word about the way in which rhetoric textbooks teach structure. Even the more enlightened texts published in the past two years or so are unable to break free of the dreary Blair/Campbell/Whatleyesque paradigm whereby one begins with a concern about genre, about rhetorical category and the technique for structuring a discourse that conforms to the category, rather than to the subject matter. Here is how you write a comparison essay; here is how to build cause-effect analysis into your expository paragraph.... When are writers of textbooks going to realize that self-directed writers of essays and stories do not begin with a question of what mode to write in but of how best to say what one is dying to write about so that readers will sit up and be moved or enlightened? It does no good whatsoever to point out how the genres overlap, as in the following example:

> Whole essays and parts of essays have traditionally been divided into four basic types or modes, each calling for its own kind of rhetoric. Beyond the paragraph level, those modes--description, narration, argumentation (or exposition), and argument--are rarely found in pure form. A representative essay will cross boundaries, setting a descriptive scene for an explanation, showing how a narrarted incident lends support to an argument, and so forth. You needn't worry, then, about suddenly slipping out of one mode and into another;

that is what good essayists do deliberately whenever it suits their purpose.

(from the 4th Edition of a rhetoric/handbook published in 1984)

It is, however, worth taking the time to teach students something about discourse theory --as discourse theory. The problem, alas, has always been that of confusing methodology with theory: the composing process with the composed product (discourse-as-phenomenon). It makes good sense, I think, to give students an opportunity to stand back from their works-in-progress to admire the intracies of finished discourses; such knowledge eventually can work its way into writing performance. But made the exclusive concern of writing pedagogy, too many important methodological concerns are overlooked--like learning to make one's syntactic competence reflect the rhythm of one's own personality; like posing carefully-conceived questions about a topic in order to generate an effective argument; like developing one's ability to observe minute details in order to recreate images in the reader's mind without ambiguity or distortion; and so on.

These processes of composition can be just as provocative as the discourse modes. Textbooks that can demonstrate this to students will very likely increase the rate at which they acquire the ability to perform as genuine working writers.

--Fred D. White

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, March 30, 1984.